

# Viewpoints: Small steps can shrink carbon footprint

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As a business owner, I have watched with great interest major companies defect from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce over the chamber's position on climate change. California's chamber has chosen a similar, disheartening path by resisting our state's landmark Global Warming Solutions Act, AB 32. Both chambers underestimate the important benefits and overstate the costs of taking a leadership role in the world's climate future. They might be surprised to learn how easy and profitable emissions cutting can be. I know – I am living proof.

Two years ago, I wanted to know whether deep cuts were affordable. Since then, my small company, Bowman Design Group, has slashed its carbon footprint by 65 percent with a few simple steps. We did nothing extraordinary: We traded our SUV for a hybrid and installed compact fluorescent bulbs. We started turning off power strips at night. We replaced several office machines with a more efficient multifunction machine. When our air conditioner broke down, we chose an energy-efficient unit. Our 65 percent emissions reduction was independently verified, but beyond that, we also facilitated telecommuting and carpooling, and combined visits to clients and suppliers with commutes. These steps saved employees 960 gallons of gasoline per year and cut business errands by 43 percent.

These are great results by any measure, but did they cripple us financially? On the contrary, our up-front costs were low and now we are saving about \$5,000 annually. The light bulbs were free and the copier lease did not change, but maintenance and supplies cost less. Trading a car is hard to calculate, but the hybrid saves \$1,500 per year on gasoline and more on maintenance. The air conditioner cost \$7,000, but our old unit had failed, so it was an unavoidable expense.

Here is the big surprise: Our work environment is unchanged, clients are happy, and nobody is sacrificing to save the environment. Other than the free compact fluorescent light bulbs, we used no incentives or tax credits. We simply did what was necessary, and when we totaled the costs and savings, we were ahead.

As California implements the nation's first greenhouse gas emissions cap, small businesses must do their part. We have been bombarded by dire warnings about the costs, but for many small companies, reducing emissions simply means wasting less energy – energy that costs money.

Every unbiased economic analysis, including federal agency reports, concludes that reducing emissions is affordable if we start now. Delay will increase costs, and coping with unchecked warming could threaten our economy. Unfortunately, news stories promoting green-tech solutions and new buildings can create a false impression that going green requires technical knowledge and expensive consultants. State-sponsored incentives are geared toward larger consumers, too, leaving small businesses on our own. It is easy to conclude that cutting emissions is too expensive.

The irony is that small businesses are well positioned to lead the green revolution. Entrepreneurs can make decisions and take action quickly. And cutting costs is always an important incentive. This is why the business community needs reliable information.

The Bowman Design Group experiment proves that slashing emissions well ahead of California's ambitious timetable can be surprisingly easy and cost-effective. Here is the strategy:

- Take simple actions immediately. Switch to energy-efficient light bulbs and plug everything in to power strips that you can switch off at night. Enjoy daylight and fresh air as much as possible. See whether upgrading office equipment lets you consolidate several machines into one. The lease and maintenance costs are likely to be revenue-neutral or better.
- Choose measures that save money and provide other co-benefits. If telecommuting improves productivity while cutting emissions, do it. If adding a skylight provides fresh air while reducing lighting and air conditioning costs, go for it. If replacing a gas guzzler with an energy-efficient vehicle reduces fuel and maintenance costs, you'll be money ahead. If the air conditioner breaks down, replace it with the most efficient unit you can afford.
- Maximize efficiency before investing in expensive new equipment. New air conditioners and solar power are important, but purchase them after you've made your facility as passively efficient as possible. That means insulate, shade the windows, and improve natural lighting and ventilation. Then, when the time comes to invest in air conditioning and solar power, you'll be able to buy smaller, less expensive systems.

This money-saving prescription is a proven way to reduce your greenhouse gas emissions. In the end, energy-efficient businesses will be more profitable businesses. The California Chamber of Commerce should embrace our state's forward-looking climate initiatives because they will make our economy more competitive in the long run. In the short term, the biggest barrier to cost-saving action is a misperception based on misinformation.

Some energy-intensive firms might face difficult challenges, but my company's experience proves that going green is easier than most business owners think. We are taking steps that every company in California should take to ensure a better future for our communities and our families. As business owners, we can improve California's economy and environment at the same time.

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